

ing my first short story in a British science-fiction magazine, I heard that the story had been picked by Judy for her anthology of the year's best sf. Thirty-five years later I can still remember the thrill of excitement, the sense of amazement that every novice writer has felt at the first sign of critical approval.

But Judy Merrill, I soon discovered, was no ordinary critic. By the late 1950s science fiction on both sides of the Atlantic was almost totally ossified. Its great days of energy and innovation lay ten years in the past, and already sf was beginning to formula-rize itself and strengthen the ghetto walls that screened it from what was going on in the real world. As I found to my cost when I started submitting stories to the American magazines, the editors and fans were uninterested in science fiction's future but only in its past, in the safe certainties of interplanetary travel, time machines and a comic-book view of the world that was virtually no advance on the Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon strips that I read as a child in 1930s Shanghai. One American editor alone stood out against this deliberate narrowing of science fiction's imaginative possibilities, and that editor was Judith Merrill.

During the dozen or so years of her *Annual Best Science Fiction*, years that coincided with my apprenticeship as a writer, Judy picked a number of my stories for her anthologies, but I would have devoured those precious volumes if she had never glanced at me. What impressed me about Judy's choice of the year's best short fiction and the copious editorial comments that seemed to place each story on a pedestal of its own, was that she saw sf as part of a larger imaginative world that extended well beyond the borders of the mainstream novel into the realms of politics and philosophy, theatre and the visual arts, psychology and the consumer society. She loved science fiction, as I did, for its energy and sheer gutsy newness, which had all the glitter and excitement of a line of concept cars at a motor-show and she saw that its sometimes naive but always visceral feel for the great issues of the day, for the pulse of change, gave it a range and flexibility that the traditional mainstream novel could rarely match.

More than that, Judy understood that science fiction's popular authority, in film, TV and advertising, allowed it to act like an easily convertible currency,

the agile host at a party who can find the informal links between strangers. In Judy's anthologies avant-garde writers from Michael Moorcock's *New Worlds* rubbed shoulders with Borges and Calvino and science-fiction gadflies like Robert Sheckley. Unlike the realist bourgeois novel, in the imaginative realm over which Judy presided there were no walls but the widest windows onto the new.

Given my complete agreement with Judy's views as she expressed them over the years in her anthologies, I looked forward eagerly to meeting her when she arrived for the first time in London in 1966. I was instantly struck by her charm, sharp intelligence and New York bite but what surprised me was that after ten years of agreeing with her every word across the breadth of the Atlantic, when we met in

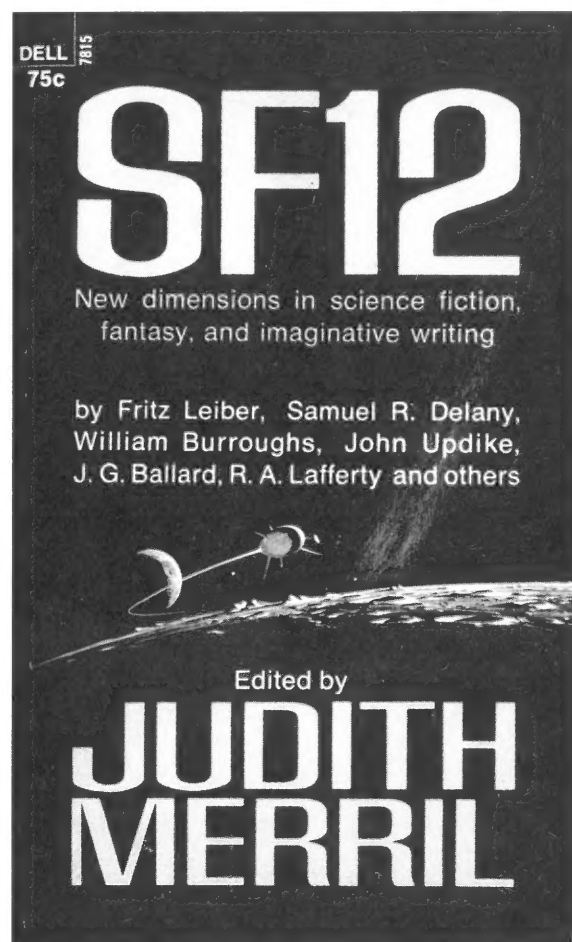
person we seemed to disagree vociferously about everything. I remember wonderful arguments with her that would last all day, carried on from one noisy pub to the next, from an exhibition gallery to the flat where she cooked a meal and on to the evening's party, arguments fuelled by what must have been all the distilleries in Scotland and half the vineyards of France.

When she left England after her final visit the light seemed to grow greyer, and when she gave up her anthologies and moved to Canada one of the few generous and thoughtful voices in American sf fell silent, with consequences that soon became evident. Science fiction in both the USA and Britain entered the most commercialized and retrograde period it has ever known during the 1970s, though happily the cyberpunk leap forward led by William Gibson in the 1980s

showed that sf can still renew itself. However it may be that Gibson and the cyberpunks were never writing science fiction at all, but, to their credit, an entirely new and free-standing form of imaginative fiction.

If so, then science fiction, as I suspect, is now dead, and probably died at about the time that Judy closed her anthology and left to found her memorial library to the genre in Toronto. I remember my last sight of her surrounded by her friends and all the books she loved, shouting me down whenever I tried to argue with her, the strongest woman in a genre for the most part created by timid and weak men.

J. G. Ballard



would want visitors to test itself against, that the self whose tomb this is would have designed the tomb so its sentry profile would be exercised, challenged, kept entertained and satisfied. It's what I'd do."

"That's a very smart observation. What made you think of it all of a sudden? Or was it also something..."

"I asked Ramirez about it that day in the orchard. Mentioned it before he did. We talked about what the tombs really were. He told me that your intercept, Dormeuse – Arasty – would appear at various times, run different modes..."

"And walk with you like this?"

"Not necessarily. Some intercepts did, he said. He also told me that whoever could code personalities and structure reality perception would not bother with ancient mortuary forms – corridors, burial chambers and such like – unless they were playing at something, *wanted* to invite plunderers."

"Again, very shrewd. He didn't say much when he was here but I miss this Ramirez. You're both right. We do want you here. We give each other purpose."

Beni watched his display for the slightest flicker, let his peripheral vision guide him. "We are your future. We let you exist in time."

"Empowering each other. Yes, Beni. I like that. Like the fish and the fisher. Here for each other."

"So let me get on with it, Arasty. You try to stop me. I try to reach the core chamber."

"And what? Put your name up there with Ramirez's. Scrawl it on the watch screen and hurry out again? Did he tell you he did that?"

"I don't believe you."

"Did he tell you what else he did? Everything he did? You said Ramirez drew my face. Did he love me too, do you think? This image from an ancient age?"

Which part to answer? She was distracting him with her intriguing remarks, possibly giving deliberate untruths to unnerve him. "I'm not sure what he felt. Fascination. Determination to see you as the person who made this. Set this up for the future. It makes for a sort of intimacy. Something very powerful."

"Intimacy. I'm flattered. I never expected this sort of well – kinship across centuries."

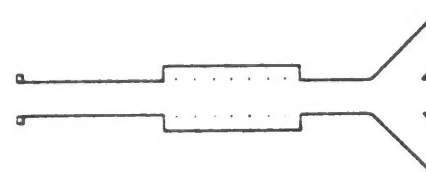
But Beni had stopped.

"What is it?" the phantom asked. "Worried that there's no core chamber? No second peristyle?"

"I should have reached it. Show me the plan. The real one."

"You've already seen it. Look."

Again there was the alarm, the panic, terror surging up.



"You continue to make it more interesting."

"It's all I have, like you say. The chance to chal-

lenge, be entertained."

Beni needed to talk it through. "One of the few things we learned from you Tastans was sealed comp technology." He touched his scanner. "This can't be tampered with, so you've interfered with my perceptual processes."

He pressed a contact, randomized the grabs, sent surges through both equipment and self. He had practised this, did not flinch from the small electroshocks. The original tomb-plan came and went: single peristyle original, this new triple corridor display, double peristyle, single, double, triple – they flashed and flickered, cycled from one to the other.

It wasn't his vision then – unless it was misinformation at the brain's visual centre.

And when he looked at the phantom's face, saw the smile under the black glass eyes, he understood her simple strategy.

"I can't be sure now can I?"

Again, Ramirez's words were there. Allow that the Stones have you.

Beni sighed as if in frustration and despair, closed his eyes, accessed, believed he accessed, the neural link Ramirez had given him, actually given him, a parting gift surgically implanted in the town clinic, a legacy from surrogate father to surrogate son.

The single peristyle configuration – classic Tastan grab – sat in the light of his mind's eye. He was in the second length of corridor, so close to the chamber. He dared not linger over it in case she suspected. Again he sighed as if in frustration.

"Your decision?" she said.

"Excuse me?" Feigning bafflement, exhaustion, loss of resolve. Let her read those. The battle had been joined in earnest.

"On or back? I still may let you go. Perhaps with a souvenir as a reminder. Or perhaps none, provided you promise to come back and talk to me again. Keep me entertained."

Was that a possibility he dared consider? This intercept – this tomb, to make the distinction – did seem different from all accounts, rhapsodizing, showing whimsy, negotiating, pretending to, taunting like this, first one mode then another, just as Ramirez had told him she would be.

"I'm your little egg-stealer, remember. We continue."

"Hope is always beautiful," she said.

Beni didn't comment, strode on five, ten, 20 metres, surely into the tholos, but would not glance at his display now, nor at her, would not consult his link. He wanted her to court him, whatever came of it. This visit had to matter. But he was in the tholos, the skull chamber, he told himself. Had to be.

Finally she spoke, easily, losing no face by it, perhaps in a new mode, he couldn't tell, though her question suggested it.

"So, little hunter, have you ever wondered why there are only 85 tombs? The Tastan culture lasted seven centuries, at least 35 generations. Why only 85 tombs?"

He didn't understand all her words. Generations.